



BY JOHN A. WITTE JR., PRESIDENT, AMERICAN SALVAGE ASSOCIATION

## Changing the marine salvor image

One of the most satisfying accomplishments of my professional career to date has been my participation and subsequent Presidency of the American Salvage Association.

Founded in 2000, the ASA has quickly transformed itself from a small group of dedicated, hard charging and fiercely competitive professionals to a larger group of dedicated, hard charging, fiercely competitive professionals who have learned a very simple and valuable lesson: Promoting communication among ourselves and others in our field, as well as our collective participation in the regulatory process, is the way for a more productive and successful future for all involved in the business of marine salvage. However, this willingness to communicate has not always been the case.

Growing up in this business as the eldest son of J. Arnold Witte, and as President and CEO of Donjon Marine Co. Inc., president of the ASA and current president of the International Salvage Union (ISU)—I have attended a number of casualty response meetings where the spirit was not that of cooperation and communication, but rather tension and distrust.

During these meetings, the salvor was not considered a marine professional, instead, the salvor was widely believed to be a necessary evil likened more to a scavenger looking to pick the bones of a stricken vessel rather than a necessary component of any successful response. We

salvors were considered the marine undertakers of the world. This is not how I want marine salvage to be perceived.

Another term that I heard regularly when working in a casualty situation was "pirate." As a teenager, who was more concerned with the excitement of the work, I failed to realize that being called a pirate was neither a flattering portrayal nor one most marine professionals wanted to be compared to. When I thought of a pirate I was reminded of the many movies I had seen, where the pirate was a swashbuckling adventure seeker, the hero who rescued the pretty girl and was rewarded by the appreciative king before heading out to sea to do it all over again. As I grew older, I began to realize that being called a pirate was not a good thing.

While needed, we in the marine salvage industry were clearly not universally wanted or trusted by either the owners, their insurers or the regulatory community. Even as a young man, I knew this perception had to change for the marine salvage community to become part of the *mainstream* response community.

We in the marine salvage community understand that to be part of the future necessitated by casualties like the *Exxon Valdez*, we need to be open and communicate with other responders. The ASA has fostered a relationship with not only the owners and the insurance community, but also federal response organizations such as the United States Coast

Guard, NOAA and the United States Navy. The ASA membership presently sits on many different Partnership Action Teams, related regulatory boards and committees who have real and tangible input into the regulatory process relating to marine issues now and into the future.

To make a difference we have learned that we need to cooperate and communicate with those that may not know our businesses as well as we do, but who are decision makers in the truest sense of the word. Instead of trying to work outside the system, we have realized that we must work within the system. We must offer our views and opinions, based upon our experience and professionalism, that have come from many years of dedication to the needs of the marine community.

While we in the salvage community anxiously await pending modifications to OPA-90 as well as related regulatory support and acknowledgement as to our role in support of not only marine response and National Security issues, we continue to work within the present system so that if we are ever needed, we will be there to provide the personnel, equipment and professionalism to rectify any marine dilemma which may befall our great nation. That is the ongoing goal of the ASA and the professional salvage community. Simply put, we are here to help.

[www.americansalvage.org](http://www.americansalvage.org)

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## MARINELOG

ISSN 08970491

USPS 576-910

A Simmons-Boardman Publication

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